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Laos: Beyond the Revolution

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Laos: Beyond the Revolution.

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American to write his speeches for him? Simpson's lack of wonder is a measure of how comfortably Americans fit the classic colonial mode. "We worked hard and we played hard," Simpson observes of his colleagues in USIA, AID and MAAG, although the "disdainful distance" of the "aloof, dyspeptic Graham Greene" seems to have irritated him (all quotes, p. 84).

Still, Simpson was an observant young man and is an intelligent and thoughtful writer. Early in his memoir, he recalls watching a jeepload of Vietnamese parachutists carelessly overturn several baskets of red peppers. "Once the paras had passed, two old women emerged to painstakingly gather up the peppers and salvage the broken paniers. It was a small, nonfatal incident in a long, brutal war, but it illustrated the fragility of the hearts-and-minds syndrome" (p. 81). In 1971, as a member of a tour put on to sell the war to senior USIA officials, Simpson and the others roar out of a model Delta village into the canal: "I glanced astern to see that our roiling wake had capsized three dugout canoes manned by women on their way to market with manioc. Considering what those small cargos meant in terms of labor, sustenance, and income to the villagers, I decided that our psywarriors must be operating in a vacuum of perception. The ARVN helmsman only laughed when I called his attention to what he had done" (p. 214).

In 1964, Simpson reluctantly left his pleasant post as head of the USIA office in Marseilles for another tour of Vietnam. On his way he was ordered to attend a major CINCPAC conference in Honolulu. There he listened to the optimistic statistics, the reports of victory; he noted the way the Vietnamese seemed to have been cast as "outsiders in the struggle for their own country" (p. 165) and he felt as though nothing had changed since 1953. Instead of speaking out, however, he recalls that he "kept [his] mouth shut." While recognizing that a protest was unlikely to have been taken seriously, he still regrets this "moment of inaction." Several years of such inaction followed, as he worked hard at making various Vietnamese military men look good—to the foreign press if not to their putative constituents. In his brief epilogue, Simpson redresses that silence with a strong call for an end to the embargo and a resumption of normal relations with Vietnam. It is an appeal one urgently hopes has been heard by President Clinton.

Yet what one finally takes away from this memoir is a confirmation of the Marxist dictum that the second time around is a farce. In 1953 Simpson joined Pierre Schoendoerffer, the French combat photographer, at Dien Bien Phu; in 1991 he joined Pierre Schoendoerffer, the French filmmaker, on the set of *Dien Bien Phu*. Maybe the whole world is a Hollywood set after all.

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Laos: Beyond the Revolution. Edited by JOSEPH ZASLOFF and LEONARD UNGER. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1991. xix, 348 pp. \$45.00.

This recently published book dates from the time of the falling apart of European communism. Clearly, the only reason a socialist state in Laos continues to exist is that the dominoes of China and Vietnam have not yet fallen. Reading this most useful compendium of the politics, economics, society, foreign relations, and historical views of U.S. policies toward Laos, one cannot help but wonder how much longer the specifics of the socialist politics of this minstate will be more than historical chapters, such as the periods of French colonial rule and the decades of American

dominance. To the credit of most of the authors, they focus on long-term nation-state relationships. But they do also document how the communist government's policies have failed to transform the country, both in terms of its enduring societal patterns, such as those associated with Buddhism, as well as in its development programs. Nor, in fairness, could it be otherwise, considering the lack of resources available for investment. Interestingly, the most apparent Lao export is that of electric power to Thailand, produced by Mekong dams financed by the UN, Western Europe, and, before 1975, by the U.S.

This volume derives from papers given at a conference on "Current Developments in Laos," held at the Foreign Service Institute of the Department of State in May 1988. The introduction provides a summary and overview of the resulting chapters. The contributions are, however, uneven in quality. Some of them are by well-recognized Western scholars of contemporary Laos such as MacAlister Brown, Martin Stuart-Fox, and Arthur Dommen. There are also formal political statements, such as in the chapter on relations between Laos and Thailand, by diplomats from the two countries. There is also a UN document dealing with problems of development. In addition, there are partial memoirs related to the period of service of two former U.S. ambassadors, Leonard Unger and McMurtrie Godley, treating of events during their tenure in the early 1960s. Thus Godley discusses Chinese road construction in northern Laos in 1961-73 while Unger focuses on U.S.-Laos relations from 1962 to 1965. The last chapter is by David Lambertson, the State Department official responsible for U.S. Lao policy in 1988. He deals with American concerns relating to the POW/MIA issue, narcotics control, and Lao refugees. There is also a chapter which focuses on the refugee situation from 1975 to 1988.

Much of the information is of a basic documentary nature that will make this a valuable reference volume concerning Laos, even after the disappearance of the socialist state. There are some sections, however, that are quite weak. This is particularly true of the chapter on ethnic minorities by Wendy Batson. Journalists can do serious work, as is evident in Dommen's earlier books from the time when he was a working reporter. But it is not useful to read nonsense about "sixty-eight different ethnic groups" when clearly the author has taken no trouble to find out what the term involves. Batson's observations about the continued dominance of the lowland Lao elite are underwhelming, as are her comments about the minorities being gradually drawn into the administrative structure, all "sixty-eight" of them no doubt, like sugar sprinkled on a cake. Except for one secondary source she bothers not at all with any of the numerous analytical writings on Lao social and ethnic structure.

In marked contrast is the contribution of Ng Shui Meng, a sociologist from Singapore. Her section on Social Development deals with the Laotian government's efforts in education and health; she also provides valuable information on the status of women, noting that few have major political or administrative responsibilities and that they cluster in the lower ranks of officialdom. This is true not only in the capital and major city, Vientiane, but even more severely so in the provinces. She feels that this situation derives from the absence of women in the party ranks, which, in turn, is related to the unrelenting burdens of their domestic life.

Grant Evans's chapter on "Planning Problems in Peripheral Socialism" tends to obscure critical issues of Laotian society. His focus appears to be on comparative ideology. This view is perhaps useful in understanding some of the pronouncements of the Laotian communist elites but of limited relevance in this country still composed overwhelmingly of peasant and tribal folk. Thus his comments on the USSR as a model, Lenin's ideas, and even discussions of actual and potential economic surplus

draw us away from important matters such as when he remarks in his conclusion about the "increasing evidence of a growing overlap between a re-emergent old business elite and the new party elite." One may, of course, ask to what extent did the "new" party elite derive from the old privileged classes.

By contrast MacAlister Brown's comparing the seizure of power in Laos with how it was done in Czechoslovakia, reflecting as he does on the respective fates of the leaders Eduard Benes and Souvanna Phouma, does seem totally in context. Here he presents analysis which enhances our understanding. In a related vein Stuart-Fox's treatment of Lao foreign policy including, appropriately, his focus on the Lao-Vietnamese "special relationship" and on relations with China, provides a needed perspective. He also treats relations with Thailand, including an evaluation of the localized armed conflict between the two countries in 1987 that resulted in more than a thousand casualties on both sides over a disputed border fixed in colonial times by the French. Importantly, he points out how this conflict has been resolved with negotiations resulting in improved trading relationships. One cannot help but think that it would also have been intriguing to have contributions by Chinese and Vietnamese diplomats as well. Unfortunately, of course, the latter are not represented in Washington. Overall this is a significant book reflecting conscientious editorial work. It is not possible to understand contemporary Laos without consulting it.

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